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Linux: smooth operator in small-office environment

E-BIZ

JIM CARROLL

Media coverage is beginning to build about Linux, a free computer operating system co-operatively developed by a large number of volunteers on the Internet.

Much of the media buzz touts that Linux may be what finally breaks the stranglehold that Microsoft has on the desktop with its Windows 95/98 operating systems. That may or may not be the case. But having just installed Caldera OpenLinux 2.2, I am stunned by the degree of user-friendliness in the program.

What Linux is likely to do is give Microsoft Windows NT a strong run for the money, particularly in the small-office environment.

Linux works well in this area because it comes with a software program called Samba. Without getting overly technical, Samba makes your Linux server look like a Windows NT server to the rest of your network. So any of your Windows systems can access your server through your Windows "network neighbourhood," making Linux completely transparent to the end user.

All small-business operators who use technology should become acquainted with Linux. It's an effective and stable system that can provide the benefits of Windows NT at a fraction of the cost.

Consider that many small offices are implementing computer networks in order to share files, access printers, exchange E-mail and perhaps establish a Web server.

The traditional approach suggests that to do this right, you should install a Windows NT server. The cost effective and far more practical alternative is Linux.

The economics of Linux are quite simple. It's free if you download it from the Internet. Or you can buy a version of it on CD-ROM. Once you have this software to establish a server, Linux can do quite a bit with old technology. In my case, I'm working with a 100mhz 486 computer with a few hard drives I had not been using, a memory upgrade that cost $60 and a copy of Red Hat Linux on CD-ROM for $40. The total investment: $100. For this price, I get a machine that to the rest of my Windows-operated computers looks exactly like a Windows NT server.

Contrast this to putting in place a basic Windows NT server. You are probably looking at a minimum of $2,000 for a computer powerful enough to handle the operating system. Then you're faced with a cost of $1,000 to $1,500 for your Windows NT server license.

On top of this, add about $400 for a copy of Windows NT Workstation for each computer on your network. And keep in mind that each computer has to be powerful enough to run the system. The cost? You're looking at $5,000 to $6,000 for a simple five-station network.

I've got a variety of Linux systems for my small business. One acts as a central file storage area for items such as E-mail. Another is a Web server, making various pages available to the world via a full-time Internet connection. The reliability of the systems have been rock solid.

Compare that to the stories you typically hear from techies about Windows NT servers that tend to crash on a regular basis.

It's no wonder that Linux is rapidly winning such a wide following.

Jim Carroll is co-author of Small Business Online — A Strategic Guide for Canadian Entrepreneurs, *and can be reached by E-mail at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com*